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ABSTRACT

Planbox escalation is a linguistic method of analyzing narrative arguments. This persuasive procedure consists of 12 strategies: (1) begin with information that all sides can agree on; (2) prepare to respond by rejecting outright, questioning, ignoring or replacing the audience's opinions; (3) make the subject as attractive as possible; (4) qualify statements instead of forcing the audience; (5) emphasize statements that the audience can agree on, but reject opposing arguments; (6) question the opponents understanding of the topic if they have points which are legitimate; (7) avoid pushing beliefs which the audience finds unacceptable, but also avoid committing to the opponents' beliefs; (8) make it clear that the views presented are the result of careful thought; (9) encourage a compromise, but make it seem as though the other side is desperate for the compromise; (10) avoid being too insistent until confident that the audience has been swayed; (11) use secondary sources to support opinions, even those that disagree--provided that their arguments are clearly flawed; and (12) make the "call to action" simple so that the audience does not think it will need to contribute a great deal of time, money, or energy. The passage from "Tom Sawyer" in which Tom persuades his friends to whitewash the fence for him, Plato's "Phaedrus," and M. Levin's "A Case for Torture" are good examples of planbox escalation. This method can help students analyze articles they may otherwise be unable to read critically. It can also guide them in their writing, helping them to refute opposing positions with more sophisticated arguments. (PRA)

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In "The Rhetorical Stance," Wayne Booth tells about a dinner party he attended shortly after publishing a book on rhetoric. The woman sitting next to him told him: "I saw the article on your book yesterday in the Daily News, . . . but I didn't even finish it. The title of your book scared me off. Why did you ever choose such a terrible title? Nobody would buy a book with a title like that" (114).

The first time I read that article, I thought: the woman may be rude, but she's right. I would never buy a book with a title like that. However, over the years I have become more comfortable with terrible titles. By the standards of the woman at the dinner party, who was concerned that the word *rhetoric* wouldn't "draw in the audience," this paper certainly has a terrible title. *Planbox escalation* may see like an obscure term because it is borrowed from work produced by several other discourse communities. Therefore, it is important that I define *planbox escalation* and explain a bit a bit of the history of the term before I explain how planbox escalation can be used in the composition classroom.

Planbox escalation is a method of persuasion. It has its foundation in Roger Schank and Robert Abelson's Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding. Schank is an expert in artificial intelligence; Abelson, an expert in social psychology. The two

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teamed up together to explore problems in human and computer understanding, one problem being investigating "general methods for getting someone to do something you want" (83). Thus they developed what they call the PERSUADE package.

The persuade package is made up of methods called planboxes. The persuasion planboxes include such diverse persuasion techniques as asking, bargaining, and threatening one's audience. Robert DeBeaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler took Schank and Abelson's notions of planboxes and the persuade package and developed a linguistic method of analyzing narrative arguments. They named this method *planbox escalation*. DeBeaugrande and Dressler selected the most useful, logical planboxes and organized them into a single procedure. The procedure, as they describe it, consists of 12 strategies (Table 1).

Table 1. Planbox Strategies

DeBeaugrande and Dressler's Twelve Strategies of Planbox Escalation Introduction to Text Linguistics Longman: New York, 1981
Strategy 1: Use a situation monitoring to begin a discourse. [In situation monitoring, a speaker/writer simply describes the current situation.]
Strategy 2: If someone else's monitoring does not match your own outlook, do not accept it. You may: (a) reject it outright; (b) question it; (c) ignore it; or (d) replace it with your own monitoring.
Strategy 3: To encourage planbox escalation, upgrade the object or event that you are being asked to give or perform.
Strategy 4: If your monitoring is not accepted, replace it with a less mediated version.

Strategy 5: Project your own desires and goals onto other participants except where there is evidence to the contrary.

Strategy 6: When the monitorings of participants fail to match, negotiate the sense of the topic concepts involved.

Strategy 7: If your own plan-directed monitoring would be disbelieved, don't advance it, but don't commit yourself to its opposite either.

Strategy 8: If your monitoring might be disbelieved, don't advance it directly, but ask others for reasons why it would not be plausible.

Strategy 9: If you desire objects or favours from people, reject their ASKs, INVOKE THEMEs, and INFORM REASONs until planbox escalation reaches BARGAINs.

Strategy 10: Prevent goal abandonment or extreme escalation by showing indecision in your refusals.

Strategy 11: To upgrade your contribution and steer escalation toward a good bargain, inform or invoke outlooks of people who are absent and can't contradict you, so that you will not seem unreasonable or greedy.

Strategy 12: To encourage co-operation, downgrade the expenditure of time and resources that others must make to further your goal.
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The descriptions of these 12 strategies are filled with linguistic jargon, but the premise is fairly easy to explain. Each of these 12 strategies builds on the previous strategy. When the individuals who are engaged in an argument incorporate these strategies into their argument, the argument develops in a meaningful way. DeBeaugrande and Dressler demonstrate the value of planbox escalation using the passage from The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in which Tom perusades Ben--and eventually all of his other friends as well--to whitewash Aunt Polly's fence for him. For example, Ben begins the discussion by using a situation monitoring. Of course, Ben doesn't know that's what he's doing.

He simply approaches Tom and tells him: "Say--*I*'m a going in a-swimming, *I* am. Don't you wish you could?" (Twain 17). Ben certainly has no inkling that Tom will disagree with this statement. He is simply commenting on the facts, as he perceives them, to begin a conversation (DeBeaugrande and Dressler 173-74).

So Ben is quite startled when Tom turns around and employs strategy 2. Instead of agreeing with Ben, he replaces Ben's situation monitoring with his own: he claims to enjoy whitewashing, asking "Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?" (Twain 18). And while Tom stops speaking after that question, his actions fulfill strategy 3: he upgrades the task of whitewashing by making it appear to be a high art: "Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth--stepped back to note the effect--added a touch here and there--criticized the effect again" (Twain 18, DeBeaugrande and Dressler 174-75).

DeBeaugrande and Dressler further demonstrate that the scene contains examples of each of the other nine planbox strategies. However, these three examples should be sufficient to demonstrate the process of planbox escalation: the participants in an argument build on each other's comments, and they end up learning something during the altercation. Of course, not all arguments work so neatly. But planbox analysis can also help us understand why unsuccessful arguments fail. Imagine, for example, two children arguing in a school yard. Perhaps one has called the other a chicken. The insulted child will probably respond, "Am not." The attacker will reply "Are to." They will continue to yell "Am not" and "Are to" back and forth at one another, despite

the fact that neither one is convincing the other. Both of the children in this scenario would be limiting themselves to strategy 2 arguments, and that is a linguistic explanation of why the argument fails to develop meaningfully.

Although DeBeaugrande and Dressler carefully explain how each of their 12 strategies pertain to Tom Sawyer, I wondered whether planbox escalation could actually be used to analyze other persuasive arguments. I decided to choose a classical narrative argument and demonstrate that the argument was effective even though it did NOT use the 12 strategies that DeBeaugrande and Dressler describe. I chose Plato's Phaedrus as my guineau pig.

To my surprise, I found every one of the 12 strategies in the Phaedrus. I will not elaborate on the analysis here because it took several pages. The important thing to realize is that, while I was not convinced of the usefulness of planbox escalation as I read DeBeaugrande and Dressler's book, I became convinced of it as I tried out the method for myself. In fact, I decided that planbox escalation applied so neatly to the Phaedrus that I wanted to try applying it to non-narrative arguments as well.

I started working with some persuasive papers which I had just finished grading. Naturally, I did not find evidence of each of the 12 strategies in each of my students' papers, but then, I would not give Plato a *C-*, either. I was intrigued to realize that most of the passages in which my students defied rules of planbox escalation were passages which I had already marked as problematic. In essence, I had already completed a

planbox analysis . . . without using linguistic jargon. But planbox analysis made me aware of how similar my students' problems were. I had approached the task of commenting as if each paper were a unique entity--carefully giving each student personal comments. The planbox analyses were much less personal. I quickly noticed that the basic problem many of my students had in refuting their opponents' arguments was that they argued with the same level strategy their opponents had used. Like children on a playground, they refuted strategy 2 arguments with other strategy 2 arguments, rather than developing more sophisticated arguments.

I began to wonder whether it would be possible to teach my students some modified form of planbox escalation. If they understood planbox escalation, they could more effectively analyze texts written by themselves, their peers, and "real" authors.

You might wonder why I was so concerned about teaching them to analyze professional texts when I had seemingly just discovered a way to simplify the commenting process. I felt confident I had successfully explained my students' writing problems to them--and I liked the personal comments--but I was a very frustrated reading teacher.

I had spent a disturbing year working with a 101 textbook which contained, among other things, articles on politically charged social issues. I liked the text. I had been on the committee that had selected it. But I didn't like the responses that the persuasive articles in the text received, either from

the students or from some of my colleagues.

When I assigned controversial articles to my students, I tried to keep my opinions to myself while the students openly debated the articles. However, my students seemed to have a great deal of trouble critically reading such articles, even though they had analyzed seemingly more difficult articles--about less controversial issues--earlier. Again, their responses were analogous to the situation I described earlier, where the children on a playground argue at the same level.

I was not alone in my frustration. I heard many of my colleagues complaining--complaining not so much about the text, but about the students. One particular instructor was perplexed because she would have her students read several articles on a topic, then write a paper on the same topic. She could not understand why, after being given so much to think about, their papers frequently did nothing but parrot back the information from one or two of the articles.

The problem these students faced was not a lack of material or a lack of interest in the material. The problem was that the students simply did not have what Maxine Hairston calls the "tools of inquiry" that they would need to critique articles on politically charged social issues (B3). And I think that planbox escalation may be just the tool this job requires.

Obviously, 101 students are not ready to understand the 12 strategies suggested by DeBeaugrande and Dressler. My first step, then, in trying to teach students to analyze texts using

planbox escalation was to rewrite the 12 strategies without the linguistic jargon (Table 2).

Table 2. Planbox Strategies Simplified

Persuading a Hostile Audience

Persuading someone to change their beliefs is one of the most difficult tasks a writer can attempt. Since your audience usually has some valid reasons for believing the way that they do, you must come up with better reasons for your beliefs. When you are trying to change your readers' minds about an issue, don't try to ignore their current beliefs. Be careful not to offend your readers, but explain in detail why your way of approaching the subject is preferable.

Linguists (people who study language as a science) have studied the techniques that people use--in both speaking and writing--when they try to persuade one another. They have found that people employ different strategies depending upon the situation. In some cases, a speaker or writer will simply try to reach some compromise with the audience. In others, the speaker or writer might try threatening the audience. These two methods are among the most simplistic. Usually, when you are trying to persuade an audience, you can't simply say, "Let's compromise," or "Do what I say or else." Usually, a writer (or speaker) must go through a whole series of steps before managing to convince a reader (or listener).

Although there is no one right way to win your audience over, many successful arguments follow a similar pattern:

1. Begin your paper with information that both (all) sides can agree on.

2. Prepare to respond to your audience's opinions. There are several ways you can respond:
   (1) you can reject their beliefs outright,
   (2) you can question their beliefs,
   (3) you can ignore their beliefs, at least for the time being, or
   (4) you can substitute your beliefs for theirs.

3. Since your audience is probably a bit set in their ways, you need to convince them that the subject is even worth reconsideration. To do so, make the subject seem as attractive or interesting as possible.

4. When you realize that your arguments won't be accepted, don't try to force them on your audience. Instead, qualify your statements. If your audience thinks that what you are saying applies only in certain situations, they may be more likely to read on than they would if they realized you are attacking all of their beliefs on a subject.

5. Whenever you are relatively certain that the audience will agree with a statement which supports your beliefs, emphasize it as much as possible. But if your opponents have previously emphasized statements which you disagree with, bring this to the audience's attention.

6. If your opponents seem to have some legitimate points which you cannot simply reject, try to question their understanding of the topic.

7. If your audience won't accept your beliefs when you state them directly, don't push your beliefs on the audience. Doing so will only alienate the audience. However, be sure that you don't commit yourself to your opponents' beliefs.

8. Make it clear that you have given your beliefs careful thought and cannot come up with any reasons why they are not legitimate.

9. If it's possible for the opposing sides in an issue to reach a compromise, you can encourage it. Try to make it seem as if your side does not need a compromise, but the opposition is desperate for one.

10. When your audience reads your paper, they will be thinking about how they can persuade you. Until you are confident that you have swayed your audience to some extent, try not to be too insistent. If your audience writes you off as a lost cause, they may not continue reading your paper.

11. Use secondary sources to support your opinions. Sometimes you will use sources that agree with you, but sometimes you will use sources that disagree with you--provided their arguments or assumptions are clearly flawed.

12. Often, a persuasive paper has a "call to action." You don't just want to convince your readers to believe a certain way, you want them to do something about the problem. Make sure that the call to action is not overly complex. You don't want to make your audience think that supporting your cause will take a great deal of time, money, or energy.

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I decided I wanted to have my students read an article that used planbox methods before giving them a handout containing simplified explanations of the planbox strategies. I wanted it to be an article that they would find both offensive and effective.

In February, 1991, I had my students read Michael Levin's "A Case for Torture." In this article, Levin gives a variety of reasons why law enforcement officers in a civilized society should be allowed to torture suspects who appear to be putting at stake the lives or well-being of members of society. As part of a pre-reading exercise, I had students in two 101 classes tell me whether they thought one could write a strong persuasive paper on the topic of whether police should be allowed to torture suspects. In one class, all but three of my 20 students thought that this would be a terrible topic, and even those who thought the topic would be interesting indicated that they couldn't imagine how the topic would be successfully handled. In the other class, the students unanimously agreed that the topic just wouldn't work.

Yet when I had my students read "A Case for Torture," they fell uncharacteristically silent. In the first class, my students finally responded to my probing with strategy 2 reactions: "I don't agree; I just don't agree," one student muttered, while her classmates nodded. In the second class, one of my students was a bit more forthright with her response: "I wanted to disagree with the author. I read the article looking for points I could refute. But then I realized, this is not so

much different from what we just did in the Middle East, and I just couldn't come up with a response that would override what the author said." Her classmates also responded positively to her statements.

At that point, I brought out the "Persuading a Hostile Audience" handouts. In both classes, students immediately saw the connection between the handouts and "A Case for Torture." When I asked my students to find examples of these strategies in the article, I got many volunteers. And once the students came up with examples of the "linguistic tricks" that Levin had used, they were able to come up with counter-arguments that they had not considered before.

I did not expect that my students would be fully convinced that these strategies were typical--particularly since they had used the strategies to analyze an article that I had given them. So I gave them yet another handout, this one analyzing the way in which Levin used each of the strategies, and I asked them to bring in an article, designed to persuade a hostile audience, and to analyze it as I had Levin's.

I was surprised by the articles that they brought in. I had anticipated that students would bring in articles that they disagreed with because they were being given a chance to prove how misguided the author was. Instead, almost all of my students brought in articles that they agreed with.

While I was disappointed with their selection of articles at first, I realized, as I read their analyses, that many of them had actually performed a much harder task than the one I had

asked them to perform: they had dissected articles which expressed opinions that they completely agreed with, and they had determined that there were weak spots in these articles. Some pointed out places where an author had refuted a strategy 2 argument with another strategy 2 argument, for example, and then explained how the article could have been made stronger with a different type of example. Others pointed out where an author had left "gaps" in the paper, and suggested ways these gaps could have been filled. When we had discussed "A Case for Torture" in class, my students had proven to me that they were able to give intellectual responses to articles that affected them emotionally. And when they turned in the analyses of an article of their choice, they proved to me that they were able to use the same techniques to analyze articles they agreed with.

I wish I could conclude by explaining that teaching a modified form of planbox escalation is a "miracle cure" for all of our students' reading and writing problems. But, of course, I cannot. However, the method has the potential to help many students analyze articles that they may otherwise be unable to read critically. In addition, it can help guide students in their own writing. Shortly after I had my students analyze articles using planbox techniques, I assigned an in-class paper in which they were given several options--all of which required them to attempt to persuade a hostile audience. While I still got some papers that were so incredibly thoughtless that they offended me (even when I agreed with the basic stand on the topic), I received many more papers in which students attempted

to use planbox techniques. There was a concerted effort, for example, among many students to start off their papers with information that both sides could agree on, rather than with opinionated statements that would disturb and discourage the audience. This is the kind of strategy that professional writers know implicity that they must use, but that student writers frequently neglect.

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